

VIDEO

FAQ

Q I've heard that high-definition TV channels will soon be available on Freeview. Does this mean that I will have to buy a new set-top box?

A Ofcom has stated that HD channels should be available on Freeview by late 2009. Advancements in broadcast technology, along with the reorganisation of Freeview TV and Radio broadcasts, will make room for a small number of HD channels on our congested airwaves.

The first three channels will be from the BBC, ITV and Channel 4. An HD channel from Five will follow, as bandwidth is freed up by the switch-off of the analogue TV signal. These new HD channels will allow free-to-air broadcasters to compete with Sky and Virgin's subscription-based HD services.

Your current set-top box will continue to receive standard-definition channels. However, you will need to buy a new box to receive the HD channels. Such boxes cost around £300 at present, but that price is bound to fall considerably by late 2009. Alternatively, many PC TV tuners are capable of receiving such broadcasts already. You'll need a quick dual-core processor and a modern graphics card for smooth playback, though.

Seth Barton

Deputy
Reviews Editor

seth@computersshopper.co.uk



PINNACLE ShowCenter 250HD

★★★★

£130 inc VAT

From <http://estore.pinnaclesys.com>



Pinnacle's ShowCenter 200 received a Best Buy award in *Shopper* 211. It was the first media-streaming device that really impressed us, as it was easy to set up and supported lots of file formats. Despite this, we were concerned that the new ShowCenter 250HD seems to differ so little from its predecessor.

The hardware is roughly the same size and shape, although a redesign of the fascia means it will blend into your living room far better. The front panel has only a USB port, for connecting storage devices such as USB sticks or digital cameras, plus a power button so you don't have to leave it on standby all the time.

The rear of the unit is identical to that of the ShowCenter 200. Those with older TV sets are well catered for, with SCART, S-video and composite outputs. Audio options are also good; there are stereo phono plus coaxial and optical S/PDIFs. A component output supports HD resolutions up to 1080i but, disappointingly, there's no HDMI output. This output would be more convenient, as modern sets often have multiple HDMI ports and the connection can be used to carry audio, too.

We were hoping that this device would support the Draft-N wireless standard, as the extra bandwidth would be very useful for streaming HD video. Instead, there's the usual 802.11g and wired Ethernet support, and you'll have to use the latter to get smooth HD playback. WPA encryption is supported, so you shouldn't have any trouble connecting the ShowCenter to your home wireless network.

It's easy to get everything up and running over either a wired or wireless network. There's no

server software provided with the player, but it supports the UPnP AV standard so can be used with a variety of freely available applications. Pinnacle recommends that you use the media server built into Windows Media Player 11.

Audio support is well thought out and lets you browse tracks ordered by all the usual options, including artist, track name, album and folder. You can browse your music collection while listening to other tracks, or use any playlists from Windows Media Player. Photos were capably handled, with straightforward slideshow and rotation controls. Image quality was decent, too, with pictures resized to our TV's resolution without any quality issues.

The 250HD supports most of the video formats you'd expect, but there's no support for H.264 files. With more HD camcorders supporting this format, we find it hard to recommend buying a product that can't play it. We also had problems playing back VOB files from DVDs. Our test file played OK on our server PC, but the sound was lost if we tried to stream it or play it

directly through the USB port. On the plus side, it supports DivX and XviD files. Video quality was good, and you can fast-forward and rewind through files.

The ShowCenter 250HD is a good product, but it doesn't do anything new. Linksys's Kiss 1600 (reviewed in *Shopper* 235), supports H.264 and has an HDMI output too, making this look a little old fashioned.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Well-thought-out photo/audio support
- ✗ No HDMI output
- ✗ No H.264 support

STREAMING MEDIA PLAYER Requires 1.2GHz PC Windows XP/Vista and 256MB RAM, component, SCART, composite, S-video, optical and coaxial S/PDIF, phono stereo outputs, USB, 100Mbit/s Ethernet and 802.11b/g interfaces
PART CODE 8230-10021-41
DETAILS www.pinnaclesys.com

Also consider...

TERRATEC Cinergy DT USB XS Diversity

★★★★★

£66 inc VAT

From www.pixmania.co.uk



This USB TV tuner has a diversity mode that takes a signal from two tuners and aerials to improve reception in areas with weak signal strength. Alternatively, you can use the tuners independently to receive one programme while recording another.

The included software is easy to use, image quality is good, and the remote is clearly labelled. The XS Diversity is the best dual tuner we've seen.



USB TV TUNER USB2 interface, dual digital tuners, 2x RF inputs
PART CODE 10456 DETAILS <http://uk.terratec.net> FULL REVIEW Apr 2007

CANON HV20

★★★★★

£545 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk



The HV20 is our favourite high-definition camcorder.

It's affordable, but it doesn't sacrifice video quality and supports exciting new features such as progressive scan. You'll get excellent-quality footage in almost any situation.

It's easy for beginners to use and has enough manual controls to capture the best images in trickier conditions. The HV20 stores its video footage to old-fashioned MiniDV tapes, but don't let that put you off.



HD CAMCORDER MiniDV storage, 10x optical zoom, 1/2.7in 2.96-megapixel CCD, 2.7in LCD screen, HDMI, component, composite and phono outputs, USB2 and FireWire interfaces PART CODE 2060B006AA
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk
FULL REVIEW Oct 2007

Battery life 95m
-50% Reference +50% +100%

D-LINK DSM-330

★★★★

£130 inc VAT

D-Link's new streaming media player is the first to use DivX Connected, which means you can access content directly from DivX's Stage6 website. More interestingly, it has been designed so that open-source plug-ins can be used to add new capabilities.

The plug-ins have to be installed on the PC you're using as a server. The DSM-330 uses the same rendering engine as the popular Firefox web browser and so should be easy for developers and enthusiasts to get to grips with. Some early examples accompanied our review unit, with the best one giving us access to Google Maps. Having this on your living room TV is initially impressive, but it's not very practical, as there's no search function for postcodes and you can't print your results. It's a good sign of things to come, but it's not a reason to buy the DSM-330 now.

The player is small and very light, but looks rather cheap. There's a USB port on the front for accessing files from portable storage devices. The remote is well designed, but the interface was slow to react to our button presses. DivX video playback looked good, and you can fast-forward and rewind through recordings at a variety of speeds.

There are plenty of audio and video connectors. An HDMI port is ideal for connecting to HD TVs and supports all the usual HD resolutions including 1080p. There's also HD support through component, which is routed out of the SCART connector using a supplied



SUMMARY

- ✓ Runs open-source plug-ins
- ✓ HDMI output
- ✗ Limited video support

STREAMING MEDIA PLAYER Requires 1.6GHz PC Windows XP/Vista and 512MB RAM, HDMI, SCART and component, composite, S-video, optical and coaxial S/PDIF, phono stereo outputs, USB, 100Mbit/s Ethernet and 802.11b/g interfaces
PART CODE DSM-330
DETAILS www.d-link.co.uk

lead. There are S-video and composite outputs, too, with stereo phono and both coaxial and optical S/PDIFs for audio.

Setting up the DSM-330 is straightforward. It comes with its own server software that you install on the PC hosting your media files. We couldn't get the device to function with any other UPnP software, including Windows Media Connect or TwonkyVision, which was disappointing. The DivX software works well enough, though, and found all the compatible files in the folders we indicated.

The main problem with the DSM-330 is the limited number of video file formats it supports. It's primarily aimed at users who are dedicated to DivX, but the lack of H.264 support is particularly disappointing. It also refused to play MPEG2 files shot using DVD and hard disk camcorders. It's possible that support for these formats will be

added later through a plug-in, but until this happens we'd think carefully before buying.

The DSM-330 has a lot of potential thanks to its open-source capabilities, and we'll be keeping a close eye on developments. Unfortunately, its sluggish interface and lack of H.264 support means that Linksys's Kiss 1600 is currently a better choice (see *Shopper* 235 for more details).

Seth Barton

CHOOSING A... TV Card

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

INTERFACE: USB or PCI
TUNER: Digital or hybrid
INPUTS: Radio frequency (RF)
CAPTURE FORMAT: MPEG2
HARDWARE COMPRESSION: No
 Recommended minimum in grey

1 TV cards connect to PCs through a variety of interfaces. Internal cards fit into PCI or PCI-E x1 slots. External devices with USB interfaces are easier to install, but use up a USB port. USB stick and PC Card versions are also available and are ideal for notebooks.

2 Most devices only tune to digital TV broadcasts, but hybrid tuners can receive analogue broadcasts as well. Terrestrial digital TV, or Freeview as it's commonly known, provides extra free channels, but you can't access subscription channels with a TV tuner card.

Analogue broadcasts can give a superior picture to digital broadcasts, but digital tuners don't suffer from noise and ghosting when reception is poor. You can check the digital reception in your area at www.freeview.co.uk. Remember that analogue broadcasts are being phased out, so analogue-only tuners are a poor choice.

3 Basic devices provide an RF input for connecting an aerial. To connect an analogue video device, such as a camcorder or VCR for video capture, look for a composite or, preferably, S-video input. Digital tuners tend not to include this feature. Buy a hybrid device if you want to receive digital TV and capture analogue video.

4 If you want to use your PC for video editing or as a digital video recorder, you'll need to capture video in an appropriate compression format. The most practical format is MPEG2, which gives excellent quality and reasonable file sizes.

Digital TV is broadcast in MPEG2 format, which makes recording to disk easy. Expect an hour of MPEG2 video to take up roughly 1.5GB of hard disk space.

5 Most TV tuners come with their own software for watching TV and scheduling recordings. Many tuners are also compatible with the excellent Windows Media Center, which is included with the Home Premium and Ultimate versions of Windows Vista.

TOP UP TV TUTV Anytime DTR

★★★★★

£100 inc VAT

From www.topup.tv

This hard disk Freeview recorder has twin tuners, so you can watch one programme while recording another. It also has a 160GB hard disk, which is enough to store over 100 hours of recordings.

As well as the usual Freeview broadcasts, you can opt to receive additional Top Up TV programming downloaded to the hard disk for £10 a month. This is certainly an inexpensive way for you to improve your TV viewing.



HARD DISK RECORDER 2x digital tuners, 160GB hard disk, RF input, RF output, 2x SCART, S-video, composite, stereo phono and coaxial S/PDIF output
DETAILS www.topuptv.com **FULL REVIEW** Jul 2007

CANON MD101

★★★★★

£140 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk

The MD101 is a great camcorder, at an extremely low price. It has a widescreen LCD, which means that what you see on the screen is what you get on your TV.

Picture quality is excellent in good lighting conditions, with realistic colours and very little noise. Only the lack of a USB port is disappointing.



DV CAMERA MiniDV storage, 30x optical zoom, 1/4in 0.8-megapixel CCD, 2.7in LCD screen, phono and composite output, FireWire interface
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk
PART CODE 1881B007AA
FULL REVIEW Aug 2007

Battery life -50% Reference +50% +100%